Journal of the Short Story in English
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

70 | Spring 2018
Special Issue: Haunting in Short Fiction

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OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1991
ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 June 2018
Number of pages: 73-86
ISBN: 978-2-7335-7425-0
ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference
Adèle Cassigneul, « Virginia Woolf's Haunted House of Fiction », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 70 | Spring 2018, Online since 01 June 2020, connection on 03 December 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1991

Virginia Woolf's Haunted House of Fiction

Adèle Cassigneul

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to thank Tanya Tromble, who generously gave me J. C. Oates's article on the short story, and Philippe Birgy, whose close proof-readings were of substantial help.

1 Virginia Woolf's "A Haunted House" is a very short piece which oneirically depicts two couples sharing the same centenary house: the live one trying to sleep while listening to the eerie other who keeps wandering from room to room to seek "their hidden joy" (117). Spectrality is thus at play as a structural motif but it also bears a reflective dimension as Woolf's ghost story reflects and refracts archetypal ghostly motifs borrowed from the British grand literary tradition, from Ann Radcliffe to Henry James via the Brontës—an intertextual web which critics hardly ever explore.

2 When *Monday or Tuesday* was first published by the Hogarth Press, it came with four illustrative woodcuts signed by Virginia Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell; images which commentators systematically disregard. Opening the collection, the xylographic print depicts a familiar cosy armchair in an empty drawing room—the comfortable armchair being a motif which symptomatically recurs in Woolf's photographic albums. I shall consequently consider "A Haunted House" as an image/text, a complex representation device that includes an actual image (the woodcut) and potential virtual ones (a photographic third);[1] spectrality playing on both textual and visual levels.

3 The aim of this essay is to see how, between life and death, text and image, Woolf turns her ghost story into an intermediary space, a site of modernist negotiation which, conjoining inheritance and subversion, works its own hauntedness through both intertextuality and intermediality to create an open writerly text; a literary form at work.

The House of Dream-Memory

4 Between 1912 and 1919, Virginia and Leonard Woolf rented a 19th-century haunted cottage in Asheham (Sussex), a "strange house," wrote Leonard.

> [A]t night one often heard extraordinary noises both in the cellars and in the attic. It sounded as if two people were walking from room, opening and shutting doors, sighing, whispering... I have never known a house which had such a strong character, a personality of its own—romantic, gentle, melancholy, lovely, it was Asham and its ghostly footsteps and whisperings which gave Virginia the idea for A Haunted House and I can immediately see, hear, and smell the house when I read the opening words ... (37)

5 The ghostliness of this "extraordinary romantic-looking house" (34) strikes as strangely familiar. The emphasis on the personified house's character conveys a sense of intimacy, friendliness and comfort: "gentle" and "lovely," the haunted domestic space appears ambivalently *heimlich*; that is, as Freud reminds us, at once related to "what is familiar and comfortable" and to "what is concealed and kept hidden" (*Uncanny*, 132). The spectral presence defamiliarizes and, even, "supernaturalizes" (Castle 123) the Woolfs' home but, because it intrinsically belongs to the place, it gives it its idiosyncratic hearty intimacy. One feels uncannily at home. In Terry Castle's words, the supernatural has been "diverted—rerouted, so to speak, into the realm of the everyday" (124). And it is this very warm and affectionate quality that is disclosed in the story's opening sentences: "Whatever hour you woke, there was a door shutting. From room to room they went, hand in hand, lifting here, opening there, making sure—a ghostly couple" ("Haunted House" 116). The joyous binary and ternary rhythms here provide balance and harmony, a sense of dancing unity.

6 Yet, as Woolf wrote in her diary, Asheham could also be "dim & mysterious" (*Diary 1*, 32), maybe even somewhat disquieting. Gloom and mystery undeniably prevail in "A Haunted House": the light fades in the empty home, death and its shadowy atmosphere pervades the rooms and the surrounding garden. At the dead of night, the immortal spectres haunt the vacant household of those who cannot sleep. "But it wasn't that you woke us. Oh, no" ("Haunted House," 116), says the anonymous character whose lingering nocturnal vigil ties in with Emanuel Levinas's definition of insomnia: "vigilance without end," "a situation without beginnings or end, [an] immortality from which one cannot escape" (*Time*, 48). The living and the dead share a timeless twilight existence akin to the "impersonal existence" characteristic of Levinas's "*there is*," this enduring "existing without existents" (*Time*, 50), the absence of a determined subject which makes itself intensely felt. In the darkened house, something indeterminate and intangible makes itself felt: "a nothing that is not a nothing, for this nothing is full of murmuring" (*Alterity*, 99).

7 And indeed, like voices from the void, the ghosts murmur truncated sentences which echo the house's recurring soft beat—"Safe, safe, safe"—, its jolting and persistent force of existing as well as the sleepers' muted interjectory remarks. Woolf's haunted house is thus but a shell[2] that enshrines an absence (symbolised by the ghostly couple's desperate search of the "buried treasure") which "returns as a presence"; a liminal *there is* and its enveloping "atmospheric density" (Levinas, *Time* 46) which unsettles, confronts to the uncanny and otherness, but also prevails as a soothing agent through which life and death coexist.

8 As Christine Reynier has pointed out, the story's "mysterious atmosphere, the sort of mist enveloping the characters, the softness of their movements, the evanescence of the 'treasure,' the truncated sentences, the waltz of pronouns, the shift of tenses, the shifting identity of the characters and the repetitive pattern of the story" are "typical of dreams" (72). Or rather, to borrow Gaston Bachelard's phrase, of "poetic reverie" which, "starting with the simplest images," "always set[s] the waves of imagination radiating" (36).

9 Woolf created her oneiric haunted house out of her Asheham memories to conceive what Bachelard calls "a house of dream-memory":

> There is for each of us an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past. ... we are in the unity of image and memory, in the functional composite of imagination and memory (15-16).

10 Woolf's paratactic prose shapes and is shaped by the narrator's own dreams. "Our eyes darken," she says half-awake. This liminal state of consciousness is mirrored in the narrative montage which interlocks the feelings and perceptions of the living and the dead. As with Henry James's "ghosts of the mind" (Woolf, "Across the Border" 218), it is impossible to know if the spectres are real or figments of the narrator's imagination. Woolf toys with indeterminacy. And this unclear trance-like state compels the reader to adopt a free-associating, dream-like reading; it incites us to let ourselves be haunted.

11 Freed from any strict plotline and open to the undecidable, Woolf's unusual ghost story first appeared as a "tiny stor[y] which flash[es] into [the] mind" (*Diary 3*, 131); a playful and challenging reverie that retains some of Ann Radcliffe's typical "pensive melancholy" (2) but also strikes one by its daring experimental quality. Coupled with Vanessa Bell's woodcut, the text's fragments of sentences, flashing images and shreds of lost reminiscences, its host of repeated questions and exclamations suspended by the aposiopesic yet flowing prose create a reflexive modernist text, a haunted intermediary space which calls upon our "inward eye" (Wordsworth 188) or "transforming eye" (Radcliffe 15). Yet this surprisingly evanescent quality also entails a dense literary lineage, it takes place within the frame of hackneyed ghost stories and blossoms out of the genre's recognizable traits.

Disembodied Souls

12 Reminiscent of the Radcliffean "mooney trance" Woolf found sublime and "refreshing" (*Letters 3*, 418), strange unnatural visions emerge and loom behind the window panes: "the trees spun darkness for a wandering beam of sun," "Moon beams splash from the window" and "the rain slides silver down the glass" ("Haunted House," 116-17). Woolf's dense and graphic descriptions summon all-too familiar images, those that haunt Emily Brontë's poetry and fiction for instance. Indeed, Woolf's trees, which "stoop and bend this way and that" ("Haunted House," 117), recall Brontë's "Spectral trees, that so dolefully / Shake [their] heads in the dreary sky" (*Poèmes*, 26). Or those "lonely" ones, which "breathe a spell to me; / A dreary thought their dark boughs yield / All waving solemnly" (54). Brontë's "windy night" (48) echoes Woolf's own—"The wind roars up the avenue," "The wind drives straightly" ("Haunted House," 117). This haunting wuthering wind also calls in the "gusty wind" that wakes Mr Lockwood in the opening chapter of *Wuthering Heights*: "And what was it that had suggested the tremendous tumult? ... Merely, the branch of a fir-tree that touched my lattice, as the blast wailed

by, and rattled its dry cones against the panes!" (36). Brontëan motifs survive and are revived by Woolf's atmospheric details. They "break in," as Georges Didi-Huberman has it: "[What survives] between phantom and symptom designates a *reality that forces its way in*, however tenuously or even imperceptibly, and for that reason it also designates a *spectral reality*" *["Entre fantôme et symptôme, [les survivances] désignent une* réalité d'effraction*, fût-elle ténue, voire insensible, et pour cette raison elles désignent aussi une* réalité spectrale*."]* (59).

13 The spectral reality of seminal literary tropes is most significantly at play in Woolf's description of the window as symbolical border between life (embodied by the narrating I) and death (symbolized by the ghosts).

> But the trees spun darkness for a wandering beam of sun. So fine, so rare, coolly sunk beneath the surface the beam I sought always burnt behind the glass. Death was the glass; death was between us; coming to the woman first, hundred years ago, leaving the house, sealing all the windows; the room were darkened. ("Haunted House" 116)

14 The reference to almost mythical bygone days ("hundred years ago") points at the presence of a powerful intertextual ghost: Catherine Earnshaw's spooky apparition at the bedroom window. A "most melancholy voice sobbed, 'Let me in—let me in!' ... As it spoke, I discerned, obscurely, a child's face looking through the window" (*Wuthering Heights*, 36). In Brontë's novel, the cliché frightful ghost is present in the flesh, so to speak. Lockwood touches its hand and later badly hurts its wrist. Whereas in Woolf's text, even if faces and hands are mentioned, the ghosts' apparition remains rather elusive; they resemble light "fumbling airs" (*Lighthouse*, 138) venturing indoors. As the narrator maliciously points out, "we see no lady spread her ghostly cloak" ("Haunted House," 117).

15 Abiding by (some of) the rules of the ghost story, "A Haunted House" reworks traditional gothic or ghostly motifs—spectres, uncanny atmosphere, spatial enclosure, domesticity—and thus bears witness to what Julian Wolfrey calls the "spectral-gothic," namely the "spectralization of the gothic" (7). A "ghostifying" (Castle 141) of the genre Woolf acknowledged in her 1921 article, "Gothic Romance," writing that dismissed Gothic conventions had "flourished subterraneously" (306) all through the 19th century. And in "Across the Border" (1918), she further explained: "Mrs Radcliffe may vanish, but the craving for the supernatural survives" (217).

16 In the wake of the Great War, when spirit photography was suddenly revived in the United Kingdom (see Fischer), Woolf testified to the fact that her "sense of [her] own ghostliness ha[d] much quickened" (Woolf, "Across the Border" 218). And indeed, while exorcizing the traditional ghosts of Woolf's favourite gothic tales, "A Haunted House" also summons a more modern role model, the "portentous figure looming large and undefined in the consciousness of writers" (Woolf, "Henry James" 346), that will help her subvert and reform commonplace images, emancipate herself from conventions and invent anew: Henry James.

17 In her 1921 review of James's ghost stories, Woolf underlined the unusual "worldly" character of the master's ghosts:

> The beautiful urbane spirits are only not of this world because they are too fine for it. They have taken with them across the border their clothes, their manners, their breeding, their band-boxes, and valets and ladies' maids. They remain always a little worldly. We may feel clumsy in their presence, but we cannot feel afraid. ("Henry James," 324)

18 This congenial and mundane quality of Jamesian specters—of which Sir Edmund Orme's "positive and sensitive being" (James 86) is a fitting illustration—is clearly reproduced in Woolf's story. Her ghostly couple wanders through the house chatting unconsciously. They come and politely visit the living, exhibiting some recognizable human features. And conversely, lying eyes closed in their bed, the haunted couple becomes spectralized, insubstantial, unexpectedly less animate and lively than its spooky counterpart. Life and death thus seem deliberately confused, even inverted; they have become indistinguishable.

19 And indeed, at Asheham, Woolf had the impression of floating through nights and days "in a disembodied kind of way" (*Letters 2*, 270); her own ghostliness being mirrored in the story's spectres, clear avatars of Radcliffe's "disembodied spirits" (67) or Charlotte Brontë's "disembodied souls" (266) which, according to Philippe Ariès,

> are not bodies made of flesh. They do not abide by the laws of gravity. They are not pure spirits that cannot be heard or seen either. They are sometimes exposed on photographic plates. Even though one has not seen them, one can imagine them as shapes bathed in a luminous halo and gliding through the air. *[ne sont pas des corps de chair. Ils n'obéissent pas à la pesanteur. Mais ils ne sont pas non plus de purs esprits qu'on n'entend ni ne voit. Il leur arrivera d'impressionner les plaques photographiques. On les imagine, même quand on ne les a pas vus, comme des formes entourées d'une enveloppe lumineuse, glissant dans airs.]* (166)

20 This luminous halo—which, incidentally, is the phrase Woolf uses in "Modern Fiction" to define life[3]—shrouds the ghosts both literally, as they are carrying a "silver lamp," and metaphorically, as they possess the spectral aura that spirit photography aimed at capturing. Together with the silver moonshine, the "lantern" is the only source of light which makes the invisible spectres furtively visible. "Stooping, holding their silver lamp above us, long they look and deeply. Long they pause" ("Haunted House," 117). Suddenly fixed in the shining trance of light, we glimpse at the "tangible intangibility of [their] fleshless body" (Derrida 27). Their hazy presence has the same blurred and seemingly moving quality as *fin-de-siècle* composite photographs,[4] the same eerie and oddly nebulous appearance as Julia Margaret Cameron's Pictorialist portraits of Woolf's mother, Julia Jackson Stephen.[5] They are, to borrow James's words, "a splendid presence" (79).

21 In her memoirs, Virginia Woolf writes about her dead mother's invisible yet oddly vivid presence, her "supernatural and paradoxical phenomenality" (Derrida 27). Remembering one of her photographic apparitions, she calls her a "vision" ("Sketch," 87), just as she called her deceased brother Thoby "queer ghost" (*Diary 3*, 275). In "A Haunted House," the play on light and darkness, together with the mystifying atmosphere, turn the domestic space into a *camera obscura* which produces evasive and flickering though compelling images; images which make the whole ghostliness of the haunted place discernible. The house seems somehow endowed with an autonomous visionary power.

> But they had found it in the drawing-room. Not that one could ever see them. The window-panes reflected apples, reflected roses; all the leaves were green in the glass. If they moved in the drawing-room, the apple only turned its yellow side. [...] The shadow of a thrush crossed the carpet; from the deepest wells of silence the wood pigeon drew its bubble of sound. ("Haunted House," 116)

22 In the silent and shadowed drawing-room, images are reflected or projected; ephemeral still lives emerge which participate in the (un)veiling of intermittent

phantom visions—a phenomenon Woolf takes on again in "Time Passes," the central section of *To the Lighthouse* (see Reynier).

23 In *The Movement-Image*, Deleuze reminds us that the 20th-century "means of communication-expression," such as printing, photography and cinema—arts of mechanical reproduction to use the Benjaminian terminology—, "summon up phantoms on our route" (100). He calls them "phantom machines" (101), devices that create "phantom creatures" (Baudouin 11). Working on the plastic power of shadows to produce images that conjoin appearance and disappearance, these mechanical art forms are intrinsically related to the spectral (see Gunning); because they entail reproduction, they "inhabit a phantom structure," says Derrida (Payne and Lewis 61).

24 This brings us back to Vanessa Bell's shadowy woodcut[6] and its strongly contrasted aesthetic which plays on the stark opposition between the ink's deep dense black and the paper's pale radiance. Its chiaroscuro brings together opposite forces, conjoins the visible (the house) and the invisible (the ghosts), it figures what cannot be figured, namely the presence-absence of a fleeting past which haunts and permeates the present, enduring love and throbbing unresolved questions.

25 Bell's emotionally atmospheric woodcut has the poetic presence that Woolf observed in Charlotte Brontë. Like her, the ghost lovers "have only to open the door to make themselves felt" ("*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*," 158). Reading Woolf's story while contemplating Bell's woodcut, such a pregnant yet imperceptible presence becomes apparent. In the empty chair, in the empty room, one starts to project imaginary visions. Instead of folding the text up on itself, the image opens it up, prompting our visionary faculties, inviting us to participate in the ghost's search for "the buried treasure."

A Vision

26 The cosy armchair is a recurring motif throughout Woolf's oeuvre: in her fiction and her essays as well as in her photographs, it is closely connected with the act of reading. One thinks of the reading scenes in *To the Lighthouse*, "Reading" or "The Death of the Moth," but also of a 1931 snapshot, one among many, which portrays Woolf sitting in one of her Monk's House armchairs, absorbed, dreamily looking out of a window.[7] Between fixity (the sitting chair) and movement (active gaze, lively thoughts), the armchair is the place of creativity which at once offers a comfortable refuge that welcomes and frames the body, and opens up and frees the imagination. It is where reverie and reflexivity are born. Placed at the threshold of the short story, Vanessa Bell's woodcut pictures an ordinary domestic object—this ordinariness is emphasized by the home-made quality of the print—that provides a first, homely vision of the Woolfian text. Offering a generous sit, the engraving accommodates its readers to better introduce them to what appears to be an ordinary ghost story. Yet, its humble bareness, its odd emptiness suggest a presence looming off-frame. Something undefined and undefinable definitely haunts the edge of the image: the sudden appearance of the unexpected, the startling surge of the new (Lecercle 7).

27 With its spasmodic elliptic prose, its piecemeal quality and its ethereal characters, "A Haunted House" imposes itself as an open and mutable fragment that subverts traditional ghosts narratives while being haunted by them. Hovering between a Gothic

and Victorian heritage and a modernist desire to create anew, Woolf's story becomes the locus of 20th-century literary renewal and experimentation. The haunted house is turned into a house of modern creation. The spectral motifs invite speculation, they question, endlessly reviving and obstinately reworking unanswered questions—"What did I come in here for? What did I want to find?" ("A Haunted House," 116)

28 In her essay "The Short Story," Joyce Carol Oates defines the form as "an absolutely undecipherable fact," "a dream verbalized" which represents "a desire" (213-14). Between memory, fancy and fantasy, Woolf's spectres embody such desire: their search, as much as their enduring love, is their desire. "They're looking for it" ("A Haunted House," 116).

> "Here," she murmurs, "sleeping; in the garden reading; laughing, rolling apples in the loft. Here we left our treasure—" Stooping, their light lifts the lids upon my eyes. "Safe! safe! safe!" the pulse of the house beats wildly. Waking, I cry "Oh, is this *your* – buried treasure? The light in the heart." (117)

29 The ghostly couple's search provides narrative impetus and leaves the story open-ended. Hauntedness becomes a vital force, a powerful pulsating force. Ritually investing the house, the *revenants* are expected, perpetually coming back, always to come. At once already there ("Here we slept"), figures of the past, and announcing the future ("the faces bent; the faces pondering; the faces that search the sleepers and seek their hidden joy" ["A Haunted House," 117]). Spectres, these creatures from beyond, are spirits of the future according to Derrida (71).[8]

30 Embedding spectrality at the core of the text (literary genre, themes) and letting it seep into the writing itself (indeterminate pronouns and point of view, enigmatic search, fragmented yet fluid prose), Woolf makes of the short story the site of impermanence; she turns it into a flickering image, a vanishing vision. The text escapes. Just as the ghosts escape. Or "life escapes" ("Modern fiction," 149). Perpetually driven towards what is not yet there but is becoming, towards what is to come. Somebody must have just left Vanessa Bell's armchair, making the curtain flutter on their way. "Not that one could ever see them" ("Haunted House," 116).

31 Between text and image, thwarting readerly expectations, Woolf's unusual tale ends with a suspended question: "Oh, is this *your*—buried treasure?" (117). *Your*? But whose?! The living or the dead's, the character or the reader's? Under Woolf's pen, the haunted house becomes the site of a mysterious search, which sets the text into motion and unsettles references—a search which is at once that of the spectres and of their creator and which, ceaselessly, invites speculation and interpretation.

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32 All in all, resisting all obvious or fixed meanings, Woolf's piece draws its suggestive power from its uncertainty, its ambivalent status as a precarious and shifting fragment. Hauntedness triggers unsettledness, the uncertainty of reference. With spectrality, something keeps moving; *it* moves and shifts just as intermedial and intertextual traces furtively survive and flicker in the text, just as the ghosts move around the house, keep coming and going, here and there ("'Here we left it,' she said. And he added, 'Oh, but there too!' 'It's upstairs,' she murmured. 'And in the garden,' he whispered" ["Haunted House," 116]). This ever-present and ever-revived movement—a delicate motion, sheer becoming—is closely connected with feeling and affection. Motion triggering emotion.

"'Here we slept,' she says. And he adds, 'Kisses without number.' ... The doors go shutting far in the distance, gently knocking like the pulse of a heart" (117). Haunting is felt as an affect, affecting body and mind (Lecercle 7). Affecting Woolf's prose and readerly experience. This is why, we could talk of a *movement-text*, as Deleuze talks of movement-images: a text that both represents and enacts movement; a text which, performing hauntedness, keeps on moving us.

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NOTES

1. I here adapt Liliane Louvel's intermedial concept, "pictorial third," to the photographic medium.

2. Woolf uses the motif of the shell to talk about the Brontë sisters' Haworth home—"they fit like a snail to its shell"—which she visited in 1904. In her Haworth essay, she connects the home to hauntedness: "... in this place I should often feel inclined to exorcise the three famous ghosts" ("Haworth," 5, 9).

3. "[L]ife is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (150).

4. Practised by the British Francis Galton and the French Arthur Batut in the 1880s, compound or composite portraiture superimposed multiple photographic portraits of individuals' faces to create an average face. Blurred and seemingly moving, they created a disturbing portrait at once definite and oddly defamiliarized. Woolf mentions "composite photography" in "Gothic Romance" (306). Note that in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud also appropriates the trope to define dream images:

But here the dream image is prepared in still another manner. I have not united features peculiar to the one with features of the other, and thereby abridged the remembered image of each by certain features, but I have adopted the method employed by Galton in producing family portraits, but which he projects both pictures upon one another, whereupon the common features stand out in stronger relief, while those which do not coincide neutralize one another and become obscure in the picture. (247)

5. One thinks of the 1874 portrait, "She Walks in Beauty," which pictures wan Julia Jackson just after the death of her first husband, Herbert Duckworth. But also of the 1894 photograph that Leslie Stephen collected in his family album, "Julia Stephen outside Talland house," which shows a sad-looking and spent woman sitting in her home garden, haunted by her own death. One may connect these little known photographs to the character of Mrs Ramsay, who, in the first part of *To the Lighthouse*, is described as "shabby and worn out" (48), "gliding like a ghost" (95) among friends and family (see Cassigneul).

6. Engraving is a primitive means of image production and reproduction which preceded photography and developed in parallel with it. It is part of what Walter Benjamin calls "manual reproduction," prior to "mechanical reproduction."

7. *Monk's House Album 3* (M-H 3), Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge (Mass). MS Thr 560.

8. While writing *To the Lightouse*, Woolf notes in her diary: "time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past" (*Diary 3*, 118).

ABSTRACTS

"A Haunted House" de Virginia Woolf déjoue toutes attentes lectorielles. La nouvelle à la fois reprend et transgresse les lois de son genre, la *ghost story* ; elle s'impose comme un texte

moderniste ludique et réflexif, véritable espace intermédiaire de hantise. Cet article analyse en quoi la nouvelle est hantée par des textes comme par des images ce qui en fait le site d'un héritage autant qu'un espace créatif de subversion, le lieu d'expression d'un geste expérimental émancipateur et d'une littérature qui, au début du XXe siècle, est en crise.

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Professeure agrégée at Bordeaux University, Adèle Cassigneul has recently completed a PhD on Virginia Woolf's relationship with photography and cinema which has recently been published by the Presses Universitaires du Midi under the title Voir, observer, penser - Virginia Woolf et la photo-cinématographie. She has published several articles on the subject both in France and in England and she is organising the next SEW conference entitled Virginia Woolf and Images: Becoming Photographic.